

THE MENNONITES

Address given by H. H. EWERT

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The Mennonites are a body of Christians which separated from the Roman church at the beginning of the sixteenth century, about the same time the Lutheran and Reformed churches were founded. While Luther exerted a dominating influence over the church that bears his name, and Zwingli and later Calvin, over the Reformed church, no such leader can be named for the Mennonite church. Although a number of highly educated men were among the promoters of this movement, none had the opportunity of putting his stamp on it, for relentless persecution silenced them with sword and fire. Aside from that, the whole movement was a people's movement. It was rather a continuation of the evangelistic movement of the Waldenses, whose origin cannot definitely be placed, but records of whose existence take us back to the twelfth century. The Waldenses might be compared to the Lollards of England, who did not form a separate church organization but were rather what may be designated a school, or an association of similarly minded persons. The ramifications of the Waldensian movement extended through France, Italy, Southern Germany and adjacent territories. A part of this movement considered its aims realized in the churches founded by Luther and Zwingli and joined them, but a large portion held aloof from these reformers, because they missed what they considered the needed emphasis upon a regenerated life, a life in full obedience to the teachings of Christ. What offended them particularly was the alliance between church and state, advocated by the leading reformers. They stood for the independence of the church and for the right of the believer to follow the dictates of his conscience. The Swiss at Zurich were the first to take an energetic stand in maintaining these convictions and started a separate church organization. Their example was followed by large numbers, particularly in all those lands in which the Waldensian movement had taken root. — But challenging the authority of the state in religious matters was an unheard of thing in those days and

would immediately incur the enmity of the governments, and they were not slow in branding these dissenters as rebels and enemies of the state, and in trying to suppress them with all imaginable harsh measures.

Although these independent bodies of believers throughout the different countries were prevented from intercourse and from forming an organized leadership, there was nevertheless quite a uniformity of views and convictions among them. The way in which they arrived at them was by an intensive study of the Word of God. They discovered in it a light that would lead them out of the darkness of ignorance, superstition and the observance of dead forms. They formed brotherhoods or schools for the study of the Bible, of which the learned men among them had made translations years before Luther's translation appeared. They held the Bible in such esteem that their children had to learn large sections of the Gospel by heart. The ethical teachings of the New Testament were more particularly esteemed by them, and the Sermon of the Mount was for them something like the charter of Christianity. Their attitude toward its injunctions might be expressed in the words of Tennyson, "Theirs not to reason why, Theirs but to do and die." — When Christ said, "Swear not at all," they thought he meant what he said, and an obedient follower of him must not allow himself to be coerced by a government to the contrary. When Christ said, "Resist not evil," they thought they were not permitted to use any violence whatever. The injunction, "Love your enemy," they held forbade a Christian to take part in warfare. They also took into serious consideration the words of Christ, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth." Originally they advocated a life of penury, such as Christ led, some even started communities where all things were held in common, some also had scruples against taking interest. But what was common throughout the whole body was the aversion to occupations that might hold out a temptation to amass riches. They thought that an occupation like farming, weaving or some other handicraft was more suitable for a humble follower of Christ, than engaging in business.

In other portions of the New Testament they found some teachings that led them to differ from other Protestant bodies. They could not find any warrant for the practice of infant baptism. They understood that a confession of faith by the believer should precede baptism. Moreover they felt that it was a violation of personal rights if others, be they the parents or the government, determined what should be

a person's church or religion. — As far as conduct in life is concerned^s they thought it should be regulated by the injunction of St. Paul: "Be ye not conformed to the world," and they took a strong position against wordly amusements and conformity with the fashions of the world. In order that their opposition to undue interference by the state might not be misunderstood by outsiders, or perhaps generate an antagonistic spirit within their own body against governments as such they took great pains to inculcate into the minds of their members and their growing generation the duty of submission and obedience to all demands of the government that are not contrary to the Word of God.

The Mennonites to-day are known as being very determined and unyielding. This may be traceable to their spirit of independence and love for personal freedom, but it is no doubt also due to the unenviable historical experience through which they have had to pass. Persecution, as is well known, has in former times been the lot of all people who differed in practice and teaching from the Roman or any other statefounded church. But no other body of Christians has been so relentlessly, so cruelly persecuted as the Mennonites, or Anabaptists, as they were originally called. As a person cannot understand the Mennonite mind if he is not acquainted with their history of sufferings, it may be permitted here to give a few illustrations of the nature and extent of these persecutions. To crush this fast developing movement a general search was made for the leaders, and they were put out of the way as soon as apprehended. Within two years the leading members of the congregation at Zurich were killed. One was drowned, another was burnt at the stake, a third was banished from the country, and eleven were executed. Other members were heavily fined, imprisoned, beaten or sold as galley slaves. A very influential leader of a fast growing congregation in Moravia was captured by the Austrian government and burnt at the stake. Other leaders came to an early death through the privations they had to suffer in their flight from place to place. — In 1529 the combined Protestant governments passed the atrocious law that all the members of this sect, be they men or women, should be killed. In pursuance of this law dragoons scoured the country in search of these dissenters and killed about 2000 of them. In Moravia they drove about 22,000 out of the country. In many places the persecution was so persistent and severe that not a vestige of the congregation was left. If a remnant remained, it became a nucleus which, in a more quiet time, developed into a self-sustaining congregation. In spite of the most

determined efforts it has not been possible to exterminate the Anabaptists in Southern Germany.

Not much different from the history of the Anabaptists in Switzerland and Southern Germany has been the history of the Anabaptist in Holland, but here, among the liberty loving Dutch the movement assumed much greater proportions. Persecutions set in here also, particularly under the tyrannical Spanish Duke Alba. Just how much the churches suffered through these persecutions is not known but it is recorded that in 1700 there were still 170,000 adherents of this faith left.

One result of these persecutions and oppressions has been the migration of Mennonites to other lands. The first large migration of Mennonites was that from Holland to Prussia, where they drained the swamps of the Vistula delta. Being prevented there from expansion, large numbers of them went to Russia in 1789 and 1808 where they planted prosperous colonies in the Ukraine and later also in Siberia and Turkestan. When the Russian government withdrew some of the privileges granted them, thousands of them went to Canada and the United States in 1874. After the Bolsheviks upset everything in Russia another exodus of about 20,000 souls took place and took its direction to Canada. From Switzerland, the Palatinate and Southern Germany the oppressed people turned their eyes toward America and built large settlements in Pennsylvania, from where they have spread in larger or smaller numbers over nearly the whole of the United States. And in our day there is going on a transference of Mennonites to Mexico, Paraguay and Brazil.

The whole number of Mennonites may be placed at 470,265. They are distributed over four continents: Europe, Asia, North America and South America, viz:

in Germany about	21,500
in Holland about	70,000
in France about	4,000
in Switzerland about	1,500
in Russia about	85,000
in Poland and Galicia about	800
in the United States about	190,000
in Canada about	88,565
in Mexico about	3,000
in Paraguay about	1,500
in Brazil about	400
in Various Missions	4,000

Total 470,265

The church system of the Mennonites is congregational. Each congregation manages its own affairs. There was the bond of a common faith between them but not affiliation. But since they have entered upon larger church enterprises like home and foreign missions, a number of congregations have grouped themselves together in conferences. These are only advisory and must not undertake to dictate to an individual congregation. They reject the sacerdotal idea. Their ministers are elected from among the members, and while they are usually highly honored, they must not try to domineer over the congregation. Annual meetings of the members settle all questions of finance and discipline. The ministers need not have any theological training but must be men of approved character and have ability of leadership. Church services consist of preaching, prayer, and singing. This is conducted by precentors without the aid of a musical instrument, and prayer in most congregations is silent. Great stress is laid on the religious education of their children. Sunday schools are not considered sufficient for that purpose. They prefer private schools because in them they are unhampered in their instruction. They are not absolutely averse to public schools but insist on the full use being made of any time set apart for religious instruction. Where this is not permitted in the schools they endeavor to maintain vacation schools to supplement the secular education. When the young people approach the age of maturity they are given catechetical instruction during which they have to learn about 200 questions with their answers by heart. Upon their confession of faith they are baptized and received into the church. The Lord's Supper is usually celebrated twice a year, the bishop being the only person that may function at these ordinances.

While there is quite a uniformity of faith among the Mennonites there is a considerable difference in the attitude different congregations take towards the affairs of life or the interests of the surrounding world. Where each congregation is a unit unto itself it is apt to develop some peculiarities which are not shared by sister congregations. An influential leader may put his stamp upon his congregation or a group of congregations. Thus the Dutch reformer, Menno Simon had such great influence over the congregations of Holland and Northern Germany that they adopted his plan of church government and discipline, that the outside world named his coreligionists after him, i.e. Mennonites. Another influential leader was Jacob Huter. He succeeded in persuading his followers to organize themselves into communistic brother-

hoods, a type of Anabaptists, who still exist under the name of Huterites. Sometimes the surroundings into which a congregation finds itself placed will have a certain influence upon it. A city congregation is apt to differ in its ways from a country congregation, and much more so will a congregation within an uncultured nation in time differ from a congregation in the midst of a cultured nation. So we find that Mennonites in different localities present different appearances. Therefore knowing only a particular congregation, or Mennonites of a certain locality, would not mean knowing the Mennonites in general.

Still the Mennonites have some common characteristics. One of these is their strong spirit of independence. They will resent any interference with what they consider their rights. It must not be forgotten that they were the first to deny the authority of the state over the individual conscience.

Another characteristic is their deep sense of the sanctity of human life. They were the first to take a positive stand against war, and they were the first in the United States to raise a protest against slavery.

In the Encyclopaedia Britannica we read that the Mennonites lay great stress also upon the sanctity of a man's word. This, no doubt, is true of the former generation, but it is feared that the present generation, in some localities, is getting more lax in this respect.

It must be pointed out also that the Mennonites are imbued with a strong democratic spirit. Centuries before the United States declared the equality of men, all members of the Mennonite church were treated as equals. There existed no distinction, in a social way, between ecclesiastics and laity, between lords and servants.

Having so often been put on the defensive for their faith, a strong conservatism has been developed. This extends not only to the maintaining of their tenets of faith but also to their clinging to their customs and practices. As German is their native language they stick to it even after they have been domiciled for a century or more in the midst of another nation. A sojourn of a century and a half in Russia has left them as German as any in the fatherland. In America it took nearly 200 years before they began to use the English language in their worship.

The Mennonites have for a long time looked askance upon higher education. They thought they saw in the attitude of the so-called learned men too much evidence of the truth

of the saying of Christ that God had hid these things from the learned and wise and had revealed them unto babes. It is true that in recent years an interest in higher education has been awakened in a number of churches, and colleges have been established, but the fear is still widespread that they may not inculcate the old spirit of humility and reverence for the Word of God. Elementary education, however, has been insisted upon at all times, and while the curriculum was not very extensive it furnished the children at least a good foundation in religion and morals, one requirement being to know a catechism of 200 questions by heart.

Without claiming that the Mennonites are more benevolent than other christians it must be stated that a commendable spirit of altruism is fostered by them. Appeals for the support of worthy causes like the Bible Society, orphan asylums, missionary enterprises find a ready response among them. They have always extended a helping hand when their brethren in a foreign land were in distress. When the possessions of their brethren in Switzerland were confiscated by the government the Mennonites of Holland send them 50,000 florins to help them out of the country. When the grasshopper plague in 1875 brought much distress to the first Mennonite settlement in Manitoba the Mennonites of Ontario lent them \$20,000 and went security at the government for a loan of \$96,000. About the same time the Mennonites of the United States raised something like \$35,000 for the support of the newly arrived members of their faith in that country. But a far greater demand on their generosity was made by the famine in Russia. No less than the monumental sum of \$1,293,000 was contributed by them to save the lives of their brethren in that country. In Holland each larger congregation has an old folks' home or an orphanage or both, besides one or more deaconesses to look after the widows and the sick. In the United States the Mennonites maintain about half a dozen well equipped hospitals. The Mennonites in Russia could also point to a number of similar charitable institutions.

As the Mennonites are not satisfied with any sort of religion but insist that it must come up to the ideal of the apostolic church, so everything they engage in must be as near perfection as possible. The Huterites in Moravia were known as the best millers and the best manufacturers of scythes and sieves in their day. The Mennonites of Holland produced the finest texture of cloth. The Mennonites of the Palatinate were looked upon as the best agriculturists, and about the Mennonite colonies of Russia it is said that they were a marvel to all that chanced to visit them.

Perhaps a word might be said about the social life of the Mennonites. There is much visiting done by them and they are knit together by strong social ties. On the great festivals such as Christmas, Easter and Whitsuntide, the grown up children, even if they have been married for years, never fail to visit their parents and the birthday of a parent always furnishes an opportunity for a family reunion.—The matrimonial relations are held sacred. That parents quarrel or abuse each other is almost an unheard of thing. The young people marry early, often at the age of twenty. The young pair usually lives a year or two with one of their parents, and are later helped by them to some farm. Mixed marriages are not allowed. Where the contracting parties belong to different churches they must decide before marriage to which church they both want to belong. The church is not so much opposed to the mixing of nationalities as to the mixing of different faiths. — Wordly pleasures such as dancing, theatre going and card playing are considered unworthy of a humble follower of Christ. There is also some hesitation to accept government positions, particularly such as would entail the duty of employing force.

The favorite occupation of Mennonites is farming. This suits their love for independence and their desire for leading a quiet life. City life they find too much exposed to all sorts of temptations.

Having so far dealt mainly with the history and the characteristics of the Mennonites in general, we may now take up the history and development of the Mennonites in Canada.

The first Mennonites came to Canada in 1799 and settled in Ontario. They came from Pennsylvania, which they left because like the Empire Loyalists, they did not want to live under a government that had come into existence through a revolution. In the course of time they spread over the counties Lincoln, Haldimand, York and Waterloo. Some have engaged in manufacturing, but the majority are farmers. They brought their Pennsylvania German with them, which they still use very largely in their daily intercourse, but in their church services they use the English language. They are thrifty and much respected by their neighbors. Their number is estimated at 12,000.

In 1874 there took place the great trek of Mennonites from Russia. Hundreds and hundreds of families left there because the Russian government did not keep faith with them. They had been promised complete exemption from

military service and perfect freedom in the education of their children. When the government began to curtail their privileges they thought it was time for them to look for a country with more liberal laws and institutions. They sent delegates to America to spy out the land. Some of these delegates preferred the United States, some thought that Canada offered them a better opportunity for living according to their convictions. What appealed to them particularly was the promise of the Dominion Government that they should be exempted from military service and should have the privilege to educate their children without any molestation whatever. In addition the government promised them large tracts of land for free homesteads, 8 townships east of the Red River, and 17 townships west of the Red River. The eastern reservation was first filled up. Then the western reserve was occupied. This was a treeless prairie and had been passed over by some seekers from Eastern Canada, who thought the open prairie unsuited for settlement. "Imagine", states one writer, "the astonishment of the dwellers on the Pembina Mountains when on a certain morning they saw the plains before them dotted with long lines of campfires which announced to the early settlers that thousands of Mennonites had taken possession of the lands they had discarded." The Mennonites demonstrated the possibility of a poor homesteader settling on a treeless prairie by building sod houses and covering them with thatch roof made of tall grass.

"Their coming to Manitoba in such large numbers, their courage in facing the privations of pioneer life in a country without suitable means of communication, without established markets and without other desirable conveniences, the energy they exhibited in turning the wild prairie into fertile fields and pleasant human habitations made them an object of wonder and surprise"—writes Dr. Smith.—We abstain from quoting the flattering remarks Lord Dufferin, the then Governor-General of Canada made to them on the occasion of his visit to them, but simply refer to what he had to say to a gathering in Winnipeg about the impressions he had received. These are his words:- "Although I have witnessed many sights to give me pleasure during my various progresses through the Dominion seldom have I beheld any spectacle more pregnant with prophecy, more fraught with promise of an astonishing future than the Mennonite settlement. When I visited this interesting people they had been only two years in the province, and yet in a long ride I took across the prairie which but yesterday was absolutely bare, desolate and untenanted, and the home of the wolf, the badger and the

eagle, I passed village after village, homestead after homestead furnished with all the conveniences and incidents of European comfort and a scientific agriculture; while on the other side of the road were cornfields already ripe for harvest and pastures populous with herds of cattle stretching away to the horizon. Even on this continent, the peculiar theatre of rapid change and progress, there has nowhere, I imagine, taken place so marvelous a transformation."

The Mennonites first settled in villages. These were organized in the following way. From 15 to 25 farmers would agree to a more or less common usage of their homesteads. On one quarter or half a quarter the village was laid out. A quarter or two at the end of the village was reserved for a common pasture. The remaining quarters were divided into strips, so that each farmer would cultivate a strip in each quarter, the idea being that good and poor land should be shared equally by all of them. But each farmer retained the deed for his homestead. Nothing was held in common. In each village was built a school house in which school was kept for seven or eight months. Within a few years there were about 110 villages built, 45 in the Eastern and 65 in the Western Reserve. But in the course of time most of these villages disbanded or organized themselves on a plan where each farmer could till his own land.

The Mennonites also organized some cooperative institutions. One was a mutual insurance company and another was a kind of trust company which took care of orphan inheritances and other moneys that might be intrusted to it.

By 1893 all lands in these reserves were taken up, and a migration set in for the unoccupied lands in Saskatchewan where new settlements were planted which rival in extent those of Manitoba. Alberta has also received a share of the Manitoba surplus.

In 1923 there set in another Mennonite migration, much larger than the one in the seventies of the last century. These left Russia because they found the conditions under the communistic regime unbearable. These immigrants, about 20,000 in number, did not find any large tract of unoccupied land where they could settle in colonies, but scattered among the Canadian population and are found in small groups in all parts of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario. With very few exceptions they have all gone on land. The Mennonites in Russia have during their sojourn in that country enjoyed a large measure of self-control and could fashion their economic, social and religious life according to their own ideal. This resulted in a wonderful

progress, and if they had been left undisturbed they would have presented to the world a model society built on the principles of the Sermon of the Mount. Those that have recently come here will, no doubt, help to accelerate the progress that has in later years set in also among the Mennonites of this country. For although it must be admitted that in some respects they have been rather slow in moving forward they, nevertheless, can point to very creditable achievements. They have proved that they are agriculturists of the first rank. For the judges of the community progress competition have awarded them in previous years second and third prizes and this year also first prize.—True to their principle that whatever is undertaken must be done thoroughly they have also brought their elementary schools up to the highest standard. They take great pride in building good school houses. Scarcely any school is without a teacher's residence. This enables married teachers to remain in the profession and gives the school the benefit of a teacher with wider experience. All teachers have normal training, have command of two or three languages and have received religious training. All Mennonite schools insist on religious instruction being given during the time allowed by law and German being taught after school hours. It is thus seen that the Mennonite children get a broader education than many children in other parts of the province.

At the present time these schools are receiving a serious setback partly on account of the hard times but partly, also from another cause. It will be remembered that some years ago 5000 Mennonites on account of harsh treatment by the educational authorities left Canada and went to Mexico and Paraguay. By this exodus the municipalities were drained of several millions of dollars. The places of these well-to-do farmers were taken mostly by immigrants from Russia who bought their lands on credit. The payments these have to make to the original owners constitutes another drain on the resources of these municipalities, so that to-day they find themselves unable to pay the schools the statutory school grant, and the teachers in some cases have to subsist on the legislative grant of \$17.00 per month. Thus the dreaded possibility looms up that the schools may have to be closed altogether.

Another item of interest might be the fact that the Mennonites have taken a great interest in the education of their teachers. As the government cannot give religious training to the teachers and cannot make adequate provision for giving them a working knowledge of the German

language, the Mennonites have undertaken to equip their teachers with a sufficient knowledge of these subjects and have for 40 years maintained the Mennonite Collegiate Institute at Gretna and a similar institution for the province of Saskatchewan at Rosthern. As a result of these efforts all of the Mennonite schools in this province, about 150 in number, give instruction in these supplementary subjects. They hope that by these efforts they will not only educate worthy members for their church but will at the same time equip them for a conscientious discharge of the duties of citizenship.

Thus it will be seen that the Mennonites are not as backward or as indifferent to the progress of mankind as, on account of their retiring disposition, some may take them to be. Indeed in many matters they have been ahead of their time as is seen in their demand for the separation of church and state, the opposition to war and their protest against slavery. And if it did not sound like boasting the further facts might be mentioned that they were the leaders in the education of deaconesses, that they printed the first Bible in America, that they launched the first large publication enterprise in America and that one of their teachers wrote the first book on pedagogy in America, and that a student out of their midst was the first Rhodes scholar to receive the distinction of an appointment to a professorship in Oxford University.

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